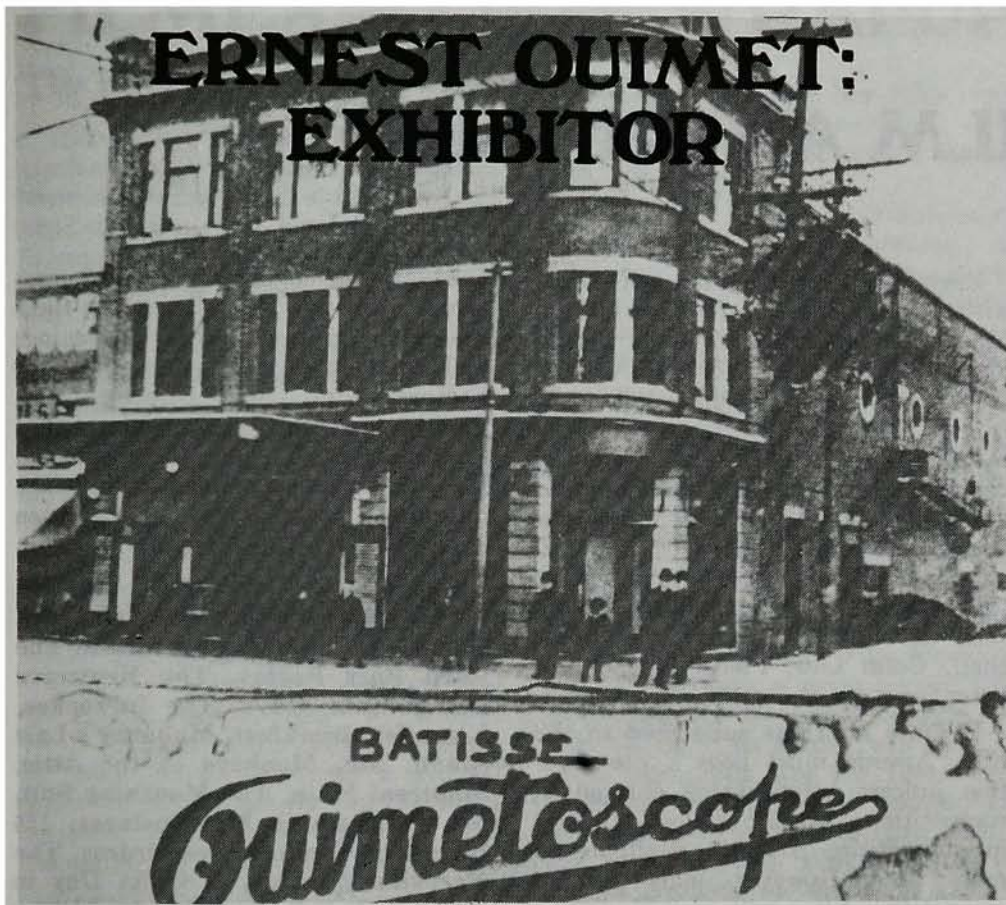


HISTORICAL NOTES by D. John Turner



ERNEST OUMET: EXHIBITOR

At the Canadian Film Awards in 1951 none other than Mary Pickford presented Ernest Ouimet with a scroll in recognition of his contribution to motion pictures in Canada. Twenty years later (March 4, 1972) Ouimet died aged 94 after spending his last years alone and forgotten in a home for the aged and without even an obituary in *Variety*.

Ouimet is best known for the Ouimetoscope – the name both of his cinema on Ste-Catherine Street in Montreal, and of the projector used therein. Léo-Ernest Ouimet was born in St-Martin, Laval County, Quebec, March 16, 1877. After learning the trade of plumber, he became an electrician and found himself responsible for the electrical installation of the Théâtre National in Montreal. That was in 1900. Films, short ones, were already being shown in Montreal, but usually as fillers at the intermission in the vaudeville houses and as added attractions in amusement parks. Ouimet was fascinated by the new medium and spent his Sundays – the National was closed on Sundays – visiting various movie installations, particularly at Sohmer Park. He began to work at Sohmer Park, and enterprisingly

flashed his name on the screen. Soon the name Ouimet was synonymous with the projection of films. His advice was sought on matters filmic, and he was even engaged to show a soap commercial in the streets of Montreal. Plus ça change...

In 1905 Ouimet decided to open a cinema. Except that cinemas did not exist. Films, having quickly graduated from being fillers to being an attraction in their own right, were shown in nickelodeons. The nickelodeon was a tiny cinema, usually an ordinary shop front, where patrons walked in off the street and for 5 cents could watch a programme lasting some 25 minutes. After a five-minute break the show would start over again. The Nickelodeon could usually accommodate 25 or 30 patrons who would remain standing or at best be provided with hard kitchen chairs. They opened at 8:00 a.m. and would grind on until midnight. Hence the expression in the trade "grind house" to describe a continuous performance cinema. Ouimet's idea was to operate on the same lines as the theatre – comfortable seats, two shows each day, and a complete evening's entertainment, not just a half-hour.

His dream was realized in 1906. On New Year's Day the Ouimetoscope opened on Ste-Catherine Street at

Montcalm. Shows changed each week and the business prospered.

Seeing the success of his enterprise, others were quick to follow his lead and movie houses began to proliferate. So Ouimet decided to build a movie palace – the first building in Canada built specifically for the exhibition of films.

Theatres normally closed during July and August, air conditioning being some years in the future, and in 1907 when Ouimet closed for the summer he demolished the first Ouimetoscope.

The new Ouimetoscope was ready by Labour Day weekend and opened on Saturday, August 31, 1907. The building cost \$30,000 – the land and hotel license accounted for another \$100,000 – and had over 1,200 seats of a comfort hitherto unknown in a movie house.

Newspaper writers of the day were not critics and they were not critical. Their copy was so larded with superlatives as to resemble the most self-congratulatory press releases imaginable today. However, the new Ouimetoscope does seem to have been a rather grand affair. Much was made of the fireproof nature of the construction, the absence of columns to obscure the view, a screen permitting a sharper than usual image, the exceptional comfort of the seats, and the amenities which included a check room and a ladies' room. The building material and decor were described in detail. The new Ouimetoscope projector, of Canadian design, was described as outclassing its American and European rivals. There was an orchestra, and a singer to fill in every 15 minutes or so as reels were changed. One commentator actually mentioned a film! Among other attractions would be scenes of the Victoria Falls in Africa. Irrespective of the reliability of these accounts, one thing is undeniable. With his usual flair Ouimet took the unprecedented step of placing a half-page advertisement in the Saturday night papers, this at a time when cinemas placed not more than one column inch, when they advertised at all. Prices were high – 25 cents and 35 cents in the evening, 50 cents in the loges. And of course with ladies encouraged to attend, candies and chocolates were available to further lighten the pockets of their gentlemen. □

D. John Turner is with the National Film Archives where his special concern is Canadian feature film production.